

**"WHAT DID SHE SAY?"
AN APPLICATION OF PEIRCE'S
GENERAL THEORY OF SIGNS TO
GLOSSOLALIA IN THE PENTECOSTAL RELIGION**

Elaine Lawless

Pentecostals are a distinct folk religious group marked by religious belief, doctrine, and expressive behaviors.* They are aware of their image as "Holy-Rollers" and "Weird Ones," but they are proud of this discrimination even though it often brings persecution. Pentecostal church services are unusual, with unexpected behaviors which are at first disconcerting to the novice participant or observer. The "Saints" often applaud God and Jesus for their steadfastness, goodness, mercy. Noisy services are encouraged in order to let the world know that "the Pentecosts are in here worshipping God." Individual participation is the norm and the degree of female participation exceeds that in any other Christian denomination. Every service demonstrates the importance of testimonies, faith healing, prayer, singing, preaching, and speaking in tongues. Nearly all these activities are manifested in a manner peculiar to the Pentecostal church service, and every activity bears a message to the congregation. Because the behaviors are signs, they might be examined most effectively by an application of the science of signs, most explicitly

* The following is based primarily on fieldwork done among Pentecostals in Southern Indiana. Pentecostals should not necessarily be equated with any other Fundamentalist group.

outlined in the writings of philosopher and semiotician Charles S. Peirce. In fact, much of what Pentecostals do, both within the context of the church and outside of the church, might be viewed semiotically; that is, as interconnected expressive behaviors which act together as signs to relay the message: We are Pentecost.

Pentecostals believe they have had a unique experience with their god, an experience which is the ticket to heaven. They have, with premeditation and elaboration, set themselves apart from the rest of the world—they act as signs to the world that they are different and as models of "sainthood." For Pentecostals, there are only two types of people in the world, saints and sinners. Saints are people who have been baptised in water and in the Holy Ghost; sinners have not. Saints are on their way to heaven; sinners are going to hell.¹

The message, "we are Pentecost," is evident in every aspect of a Saint's presentation of self. Pentecostal women in Southern Indiana wear their hair in a distinctive manner—their tall and elaborate hairdos mark them as Pentecostal wherever they go. The admonition from Paul in Corinthians that women ought not to cut their hair is strictly obeyed (1 Corinthians 11:15); likewise, the men are careful to keep their hair short (1 Corinthians 11:14) and shave their facial hair. In dress, too, the women are distinguishable from non-Pentecostals: they dress modestly, always in skirts below the knees and blouses with sleeves. They wear no cosmetics or jewelry. All "Saints" are expected to refrain from unseemly decorum and all manner of cursing, backbiting, gossiping, jealousies, and other "ungodly" behavior. Furthermore, they view themselves as constant witnesses for Christ. Not only are they models

of sainthood, they must always be prepared to witness to sinners and try to bring them to church and to the saving grace of Jesus before it is too late. For Pentecostals believe that the end of the world is very near and they everyone who is not "saved" at that time will go to hell.

Glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, has been the focus of most studies of the Pentecostals. In this paper I am suggesting a semiotic model for examining all the expressive behaviors in the Pentecostal experience--both within the church context and outside it--by focusing on one particular event, the speaking in tongues. Perhaps I, as others before me, have focused on the most expressive of the behaviors because of its more obvious nature; however, I wish to stress that my own recent extensive work with Pentecostals has illustrated the viability of this semiotic model for entire experience. Glossolalia is merely the starting point.

Glossolalia has been the focus of study for linguists, anthropologists, theologians, and folklorists. Linguists have pored over transcriptions of the phenomenon attempting to discern what phonemes are being employed and have struggled with the question of whether or not the tongues are a "language" at all. Generally, the consensus has been that the utterance is a nonsensical verbal sequence of sounds which employs the phonemes and language structures found in the utterer's native language.² There are no surprises here. These are not perfectly spoken "languages" which could be understood by a "native speaker," although this is the belief of the Pentecostals.³ Significant, too, have been the studies of glossolalia as an altered state of consciousness and trance-like states which induce involuntary physical activity and the utterance of uncontrollable, unintel-

ligible verbal sequences.⁴ The best work to date seems to have been cross-cultural studies of "possession" states and the recognition of glossolalia as learned behavior.⁵

There can be no denial that most glossolalia experiences occur in an altered state of consciousness and are accompanied by behaviors not in the control of the participants, that they are linguistically interesting, and that they pose serious theological questions. What most of these approaches have ignored, however, is the absolutely essential group attitudes, comprehension, and perception of the glossolalia experience. John Sherrill touches on this when he says, "the solitary tongue speaker--that is, one not surrounded by a company of fellow believers and practitioners--derived less psychological benefit from the experience."⁶ Essential is a "group mind" in which the experience is anticipated and appreciated. Likewise, Kildahl observed that glossolalia occurs in meetings devoted to intense concentration on tongue-speaking; he notes the importance of the atmosphere and the response of the other members of the group. The physical performance varies; what is important is the group consensus that glossolalia will serve as a sign of the presence of the Holy Ghost. The experience is referred to in the Pentecostal religion as The Baptism, which is akin to another sign to the members of the group--symbolic water immersion signifies a change in status for the receiver recognized by the observers. Both baptisms serve as rites of passage and signify a change in status.⁷

Glossolalia is only one in a series of signs exchanged on a horizontal plane among the members of the group--signs which form a language of their own and become in the process symbols of something larger. "Speaking in tongues" is a unique phenomenon in

that it is a speech event, yet the speech itself is incomprehensible both to the utterer and the listener. It is the expressive behaviors leading into and incorporated within the event which must be examined in order to understand the message and the consequences of the interpretation of that message. Peirce has written that "man is an external sign";⁸ for the Pentecostals this is evident at all times. In dress, manners, and behavior they serve as signs to others of their religious conviction and dedication. Together the various indices combine to make the Pentecostal Saint a symbol of Godliness, and thus worthy of becoming a "vessel" for the Holy Ghost. Here Roman Jakobson has pointed out the relationship of signs to messages:

Every message is made of signs; correspondingly, the science of signs is termed semiotic, it deals with those general principals which underlie the structure of all signs whatever, and with the character of their utilization within messages, as well as with the specifics of the various sign systems, and of the diverse messages using these different kinds of signs.⁹

For Peirce, no sign can be designated as such unless it is perceived and interpreted by a viewer. No sign has a meaning of its own.¹⁰

An examination of the linear dimensions of the glossolalia event viewed semiotically will complement the participants' own notion of a vertical channel (between God and Participant) with the notion of a horizontal channel operating among the participants united by a belief system. How these channels operate simultaneously is evident in the event itself. A Pentecostal religious service appears to the novice observer as chaotic; there is constant commotion--singing, dancing, clapping, walking or running or dancing in the aisles, and shouting. However, as with all

social events, there are specific rules which guide the behavior in this context. The service begins on a relatively calm note--the singing, clapping, dancing, and use of tambourines, drums, and other musical instruments build tension and increase animated participation. The momentum grows and builds throughout the service until it culminates in outbursts of possession trance states. The members of the congregation are informed by their minister that God's presence is evidenced by the glossolalia experiences; dissociation, trance, and strange tongues are proof that the Holy Ghost has entered a person's body.

The most significant behavioral aspects of the glossolalist, that is, the person speaking in tongues, are standing up, moving around, arms raised, face uplifted to the ceiling, flushed face, increased breathing rates, crying, swaying, closed eyes, jerks, speaking in tongues, and, sometimes, fainting onto the floor. The act is standardized and formulaic; the congregation can perceive what "stage" of the act the glossolalist is in at a particular moment. The theatrical terminology being used here is especially apropos, as competence of performance is one component of audience judgment of the legitimacy of the act. Accepted performances elicit similar behavior from other members. A "successful" glossolalia event will elicit tears and cries from other participants who may, then, enter the sequence of accepted behaviors and complete another glossolalia act. The behaviors are learned and are contagious. I have seen very small girls, of about eight or nine years of age, go to the front of the church alone, raise their small arms to the ceiling and contort their faces until the tears fell, attempting to "get the spirit," while their

coaches were women standing next to them illustrating the correct way to perform.

The theological premises for the behavior come from the Bible. The participants believe that God's spirit comes down from heaven and enters the body of the receiving party. The dissociated person sees his act as an intimate communication with a supernatural power via a vertical channel: God to Human/ Human to God. Viewed semiotically, the expressive behaviors exhibited serve rather as **sign** to the other members of the congregation and are **symbolically** interpreted to mean that the spirit of God has appeared. The spirit's presence is perceived **only** through the behavior of a "possessed" person.

The significance of the glossolalia experience lies with the interactions between the addressee and the addresser, that is, in the encoded message which the behavior of the addresser conveys to the addressee. Glossolalia serves as a sign, a proof, to the witness of whatever it is the group has decided that act represents. In the case of glossolalia, especially during a conversion, the experience serves as proof that the initiate has been converted, and that God's presence is in the church; without the accompanying glossolalia, the group members have no confidence that the initiate has actually been visited by the divine. I agree with Clements that the moment of "possession" is in a sense a moment of "communitas," but disagree with his idea that at that junction there is no social order.¹¹ The "chaos" associated with such "rites of passage" is disillusioning; it might be chaotic behavior in the usual sense of that term, but chaos does not reign, as the society has placed a strict "order" upon the sequence of events and their message to the participants and observers.

In an attempt to answer the question "What makes a verbal message a work of art," Jakobson has offered a schema for depicting the constitutive factors in any speech event, any act of verbal communication. This linear model can serve to illustrate the semi-otic behaviors in a Pentecostal church:

| | | |
|---------------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| | CONTEXT | |
| | MESSAGE | |
| ADDRESSER | CONTACT . . . | ADDRESSEE ¹² |
| | CODE | |

Jakobson's explanation of the model makes its application in this context clear:

The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to ("referent"), seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and the decoder of the message); and, finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication.¹³

Each of these six factors, he suggests, determines a different function of language. An emotive function is associated with the attitude of the Addresser toward what he is speaking about, while the conative function is associated with the Addressee. In fact, Jakobson offers a complementary schema of the functions of the language factors:

| | | |
|-------------------|----------------|------------------------|
| | REFERENTIAL | |
| | POETIC | |
| EMOTIVE | PHATIC | CONATIVE ¹⁴ |
| | METALINGUAL | |

Jakobson's contributions to the traditional linguistic model were the additions of the poetic, phatic and metalinguistic functions of language. The dominating function in verbal

art is that of the poetic, which "by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects."¹⁵ The referential, or cognitive, mode cannot account for all verbal communication; that is, we cannot restrict the notion of information to the cognitive aspects of language.

The glossolalia event seen through this lens would read something like this: the message accepted by the group in this context is that the addresser is indicating the presence of the Spirit of God to the Addressee; the channel is horizontal between the members of the group and is open; the code includes all the expressive behaviors which accompany the glossolalia--itself an "enclosed code."

A good idea of what is communicated in any verbal exchange derives its significance from the context, the code, and the means of contact. Meaning, for example, "resides in the total act of communication, a situation intensified by the fact that all language contains grammatical elements which have no meaning per se, and which are wholly sensitive in this respect to the context in which they occur."¹⁶ Following Peirce's model, the essence of the glossolalia event would be the interaction between the sign, its object, and its users (both utterer and interpreter); he noted that "auditory signs tend to be symbolic in character, but when the 'extension' of the body, which we call 'medium' causes one organic factor to become dominant over the others, then it will inevitably affect the nature of the discourse. That is, the medium will begin to affect the message."¹⁷ It is this interaction which Peirce has termed as "semi-osis": an action, an influence, such as a **sign**, its **object**, and its **interpretant**. A sign is to be understood only

in terms of some other more comprehensive and rational sign which welded the totality of things and beliefs together into a fixed and perfect whole . . . what anything really is, is what it may finally come to be known to be in the ideal state of complete information, so that reality depends on the ultimate decision of the community; so thought is what it is, only by virtue of its addressing a future thought which is in its value as thought identical with it, though more developed.¹⁸

In Peirce's conceptions of a phenomenology of being, the interactions taking place lie within the category of Secondness, and opposed to Firsts, which are mere qualities in and of themselves, and Thirds, which regulate laws which in turn regulate future behaviors based on past memory. Of Secondness, Peirce says:

In the idea of reality, Secondness is predominant; for the real is that which insists upon forcing its way to recognitions as something **other** than the mind's creation. . . . The idea of second is predominant in the ideas of causation and of statical force. For cause and effect are two; and statical forces always occur between pairs.¹⁹

The second category . . . is the element of struggle. This is present even in such a rudimentary fragment of experience as a simple feeling. For such a feeling always has a degree of vividness, high or low; and this vividness is a sense of commotion, an action and reaction, between our soul and the stimulus.²⁰

Understanding that the interactions within the glossolalia experience are Seconds enables us to comprehend what Peirce means when he insists that **signs** are Firsts which stand in a genuine, and necessary, triadic relationship to Seconds, or **objects**, which determine the Thirds, or **Interpretants**. For Peirce, the sign can only represent the object and tell about it. "It cannot furnish acquaintance with or recognition of the object; for that is what is meant by the Object of a

sign; namely, that with which it presupposes an acquaintance in order to convey some further information concerning it."²¹ Peirce divides signs into three trichotomies. Here we are interested in the second trichotomy, that is, the relationship of the sign to its object and its relationship to the interpretant. Signs in this category can be, he says, either icons, indices, or symbols.

An **icon** is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence; such as a lead-pencil streak as representing a geometrical line. An **index** is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant. Such, for instance, is a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it as a sign of a shot. A **symbol** is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant. Such is any utterance of speech which signifies what it does only by virtue of its being understood to have that signification.²²

How, then, are we to view the various behaviors that accompany glossolalia? As signs, are they iconic, indexical, or symbolic? We must, first, reject the idea of glossolalia as "language." It is not, in fact, "speaking in tongues," but is rather one of several interconnected expressive behaviors which act together to relay a message. The various aspects of the glossolalia event must be viewed collectively within the context in which they appear, for if given another context, they may be interpreted quite differently. The act of standing with face uplifted to the "heavens" is culture-specific, even though it is shared by many different cultures. The behaviors accompanying glossolalia in particular must be viewed as **symbolic**, but with the understanding that certain iconic and indexical components co-existing in the

event point to and trigger response. The various behaviors demand an interpreter to give them meaning. Within the context of the Pentecostal church, the meanings are fixed: the individual (usually a woman) rises from her pew and begins to sway her body; she raises her arms to the ceiling and closes her eyes. This behavior is a sign to the group that the person has detached herself from the group and is prepared to become a vessel for the spirit of God. The behavior is indicative for possession as well. The sign is symbolic and group-specific. As the person's body begins to react to its own sign by jerking, swaying, heavy breathing, and crying the performer as well as the audience **interprets** the behavior as evidence of spirit possession.

Although Peirce recognized that the meaning of signs could be operative on three levels--that is, emotive, ceremonial, and cognitive--he devoted his life to the exploration of the latter--the cognitive. In doing so, he ignored what is possibly an equally important and overlapping aspect of behavior--the emotive. There is a real need to explore the aesthetic qualities of a semiotic event such as the glossolalia experience. Henry David Aiken has admonished us to take all aspects of an event into consideration: signs are not mutually exclusive nor necessarily sequential as they frequently demarcate overlapping spheres of interest which the same sign complex may happen to serve. A sign can be used for the sake of contemplation and at the same time convey information of some importance to the conduct of life without violating its integrity as an artistic phenomenon.²³ Adding the emotive, or aesthetic, dimension should not suggest that its integrity as a cognitive phenomenon has been violated. Within the glossolalia event, the sign perceived, the message sent, and the

interpretation given elicit an aesthetic response in the participants. Not only is the response emotional--clearly evidenced by their tears--but it is also symbolically interpreted. These are not tears of sadness, but tears of joy. I have heard the words "Wasn't that beautiful" following a particularly emotional, tearful invitational. Viewing the glossolalia event as aesthetically perceived (much like folk dance, for instance), would enable us to appreciate the performative qualities of the "act." There are criteria for performance competence, rules for performance, and aesthetic responses to the performances which themselves elicit similar behaviors. Very often the aesthetic response evoked in the observing interpreters in the congregation leads to their own subsequent glossolalia experience. But only performances perceived as "genuine" serve as models for participation by others.

Mere descriptions of performative acts in religious contexts or proof of their cross-cultural prevalence can never tell us anything about how or why the acts are being performed or what the expressive behaviors signify to the participants in specific contexts. It is only by looking at the culture-specific meanings attached to the signs that we may uncover the messages they bear. Although this paper has offered a semiotic approach for the study of glossolalia, it also serves as a model for further examination of all the distinctive behaviors which mark the Pentecostals as a group and which broadcast that message to the world.

NOTES

¹ Compare Clements' "sinnerfolk" and "Christians" in William M. Clements, "Conversion and Communitas," *Western Folklore* 35 (1976):35-45.

² For an excellent overview of the literature on glossolalia see Felicitas D. Goodman, **Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). See also Dickson Bruce, **And They All Sang Hallelujah** (Knoxville: Tennessee University Press, 1946); Blanche Speer, **A Linguistic Analysis of a Corpus of Glossolalia** (Ann Arbor: Xerox, 1971); William Samarin, **Tongues of Men and Angels: The Religious Language of Pentecostalism** (New York: Macmillan Co., 1972). Virginia Hine, "Pentecostal Glossolalia: Toward a Functional Interpretation," **Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion** 8 (1969):211-26.

³ John L. Sherrill, **They Speak with Other Tongues** (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).

⁴ See Alexander Alland, "Possession in a Revivalistic Negro Church," **Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion** 1 (1962):204-213; John P. Kildahl, **The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues** (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); and James I. Richardson, "Psychological Interpretations of Glossolalia: A Reexamination of Research," **Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion** 12 (1973):199-207.

⁵ See Goodman, **Speaking in Tongues**, and F. D. Goodman, J. H. Henney, and E. Pressel, **Trance, Healing and Hallucination: Three Field Studies of Religious Experience** (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974).

⁶ Kildahl, p. 56.

⁷ Cf. Clements, p. 39.

⁸ Justus Buchler, ed., **Philosophical Writings of Peirce** (New York: Dover Publishing Co., 1955), p. 249.

⁹ As quoted by Terence Hawkes, in **Structuralism and Semiotics** (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. 125.

¹⁰ Buchler, pp. 98-119.

¹¹ Clements, pp. 40-42.

¹² Roman Jakobson, "Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., **Style in Language** (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1960), p. 353.

- 13 Jakobson, p. 353.
- 14 Jakobson, p. 357.
- 15 Jakobson, p. 356.
- 16 Hawkes, p. 83.
- 17 Hawkes, p. 135.
- 18 Thomas A. Sebeok, **Studies in Semiotics: Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 6.
- 19 Buchler, p. 79.
- 20 Buchler, p. 89.
- 21 Buchler, p. 100.
- 22 Buchler, p. 104.
- 23 Henry David Aiken, "Some Notes Concerning the Aesthetic and the Cognitive," in Morris Phillipson, ed., **Aesthetics Today** (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 267.